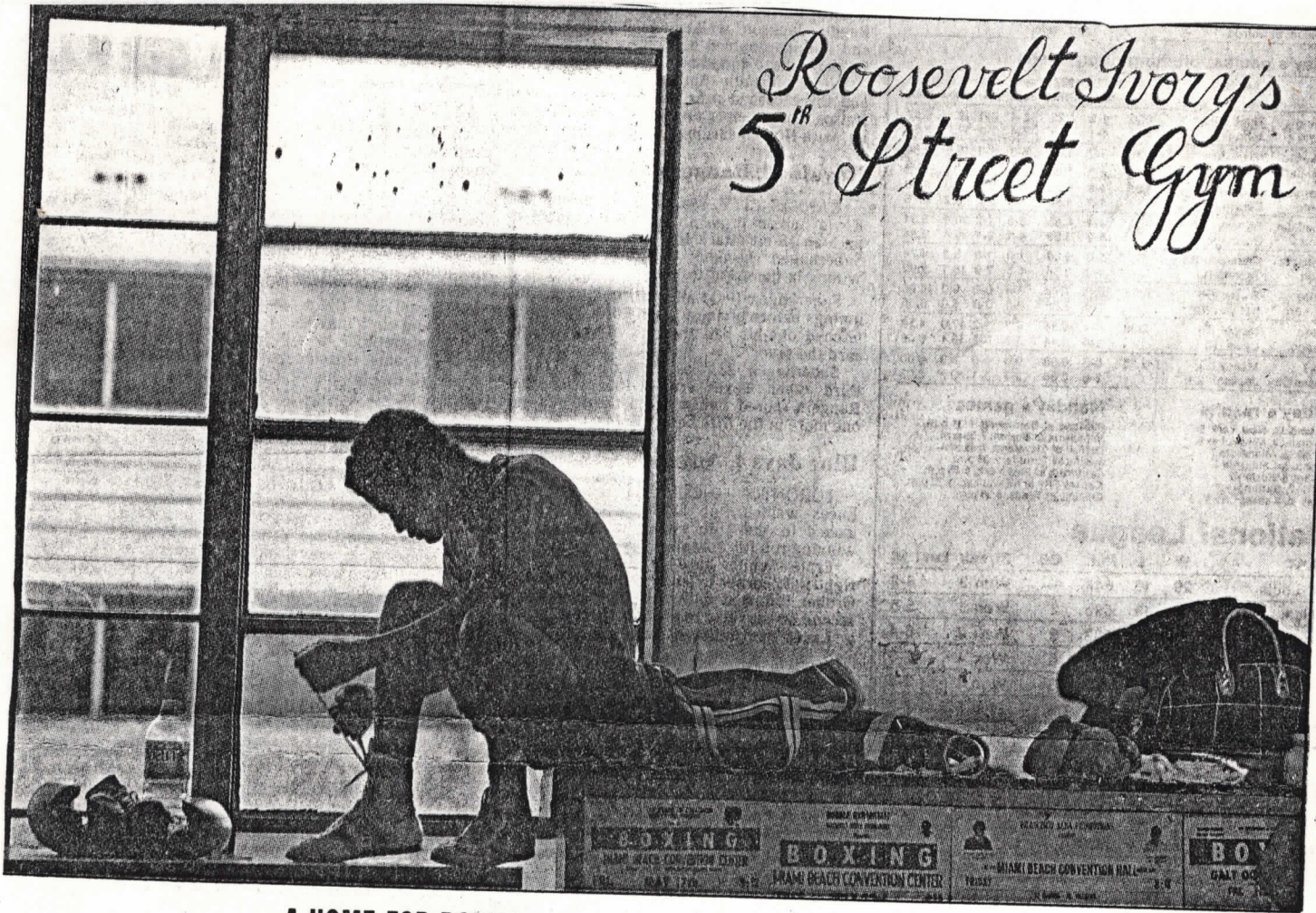


Roosevelt Ivory's 5th Street Gym



A HOME FOR BOXING Colombian featherweight Jaime Polo laces up his shoes at the Fifth Street Gym, a meeting place for the young, the old and the occasional champion.

BRIAN SMITH Miami Herald Staff

OLDEN GLOVES

FIFTH STREET GYM
TAKES ITS SHOT
AT A COMEBACK

By ROBERT LOHRER
Herald Sports Writer

They're talking about a comeback on South Beach, the real estate agents, the politicians. They're saying the south end of Miami Beach will be great again; that people will flock back and the value of the real estate will rise like the tide.

The Fifth Street Gym knows all about comebacks. It has been witness to a thousand of them. But when the South Beach prophecy is fulfilled and the area is reborn, will the once-great boxing gym still stand at Fifth and Washington?

In the past 5½ years, the Fifth Street Gym has had three proprietors. Some say it is only a matter of time before the gym's ringside bell rings for the final time, that revitalization will only hasten its demise. Others don't buy the notion. "The gym has plenty of future because it has so much past," said Angelo Dundee, who trained such champions as Carmen Basilio, Willie Pastrano and Cassius Clay, later Muhammad Ali, in the

Spartan second-floor flat.

There, the walls are covered with yellowed fight placards and press clips. The wood on the floor is worn smooth, and the paint on the walls is peeling. The sun and a naked 100-watt bulb above the ring light the gym. Two fans twist in the afternoon air.

For a boxer, though, heaven is a ring, three heavy bags and three training tables. The Fifth Street Gym — Roosevelt Ivory's Fifth Street Gym, Home of Champions it says on the pink-painted walls outside — comes with little more. There is not even a water fountain inside.

Nobody complains. Every afternoon, boxers pass through the open door and climb the stairs to the inner sanctum. Mostly they are young and hopeful, and know only a smidgen of the history that made this a boxing mecca. Chris Dundee, boxing promoter, opened the gym in 1950. He came to Miami from South Philadelphia, via New York City. His brother, Angelo, followed a year later. They found a rap audience for the show Chris

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AT THE
TURNING
POINT

Fifth St. Gym fights for survival

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was selling.

"I ran as many as 46 shows in one year," Chris said. "When you run steady shows, you have fighters training."

And so the Fifth Street Gym was filled for years with fighters — Ali, Joe Louis, Archie Moore, Ray Robinson, Luis Rodriguez, Sonny Liston, Joey Maxim, Roberto Duran, Ralph Dupas and Willie Pep. The Greats sparred here.

The club became one of the fight game's focal points. Said Angelo Dundee, "The Fifth Street Gym was my Valhalla."

Celebrities and friends stopped by to kibitz. The Beatles once posed for a picture here with Clay. There were so many spectators that a doorman collected admission.

But over the years, the Beach's stature as a fight town diminished. Boxers were drawn to the money and television exposure in Las Vegas and, more recently, Atlantic City.

The gym became more of a satellite, less a focal point. It seemed to mirror the decline of the neighborhood. Both fell into disrepair.

Jerry White once ran his own gym — Miami's Magic City — from 1950 to 1962. Now a regular at the Fifth Street club, he tells stories about its rise and fall, including rundown floors and leaky ringside spit buckets.

Below the gym, the Miami Beach Drug Store — itself a landmark — closed during the holiday season of 1981. It looked like the gym was on the ropes. In January 1982, when it was costing him nearly \$900 a month, Chris Dundee sold it to fight promoter Felix "Tito" Zabala.

"Actually, I gave it away. There was nothing much to sell," Chris said.

It changed hands again that year. Now it's Roosevelt Ivory's.

Ivory, a local promoter who also runs a construction company, realizes he has a piece of history on his hands. He says he will continue to operate the gym, even if it's a losing proposition.



BRIAN SMITH / Miami Herald Staff

The gym survives, but its alter ego, Fifth Street Fitness (above), did not.

the name on the wall. The loft is leased from owners Roni Bialor and Louis Mince. An attorney for the owners said it would pay to raze the building only if the land continued to increase in value.

If the building were torn down and rebuilt, it would be governed by new zoning laws including tougher requirements for parking. While it stands, it is protected by a grandfather clause.

"We're pleased with the turnaround in the neighborhood," said Robert J. Levine, attorney for the owners. "My clients have suffered with this property for many years while no one was doing anything down there. The building is in extremely poor condition."

With property values rising, some see destruction as inevitable.

"This will be a high-rise in a few years," said White. "Everything has to go. Time marches on." It could be the larger economic forces of redevelopment and revitalization or the daily balance sheet that eventually closes the gym, or the gym could hang on and make a comeback of its

"This place used to be jampacked," said White. "It used to look like a jungle, everybody sweating, 40 fighters training at once."

Now 10, 12 fighters constitute a busy afternoon. Membership fees are still posted.

"I keep track of members," Ivory said. "We have a lot who just walk in. You get guys come in with big dreams, next month you don't see 'em any more. Some months we got a full house."

Some come with their trainers — men like Chuck Talhami, 42,

who works regularly with fighters here. Other boxers study with trainer-in-residence Sidney "Beau Jack" Walker, a two-time world lightweight champion in the early 1940s.

Beau Jack's fighting style was fast and furious. At 67, toothless, diabetic, he is still as energetic as he was in the ring.

The young, the hopeful, the old, the crotchety, the occasional champion all meet here to live and relive boxing.

They sit in two rows of newly covered theater seats and argue arcane points of boxing history. There is Larry Golub, the 84-year-old cut man in horn-rimmed glasses, who worked the corner at Miami Beach fights while on annual vacations from New York.

Moe Fleischer, 85, who trained Kid Chocolate to a world title in the 1930s, can hardly manage the stairs, but still makes an occasional appearance. And there is White, nearly 80, the glib storyteller.

Over the past few years, their numbers have been thinned by natural causes.

And now, they say natural causes are threatening the Fifth Street Gym.

"That's valuable property," White said. "It's a matter of time."



Right now it's costing me money. I don't think there's a price on it. When the Beach comes back, I want to be a part of it. I have no intention of selling it.

ROOSEVELT IVORY